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Lawmakers, at Home for Recess, Discover an Uneasy America

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SEN. LEAHY

ST. ALBANS, Vt.—This tiny, pastoral community near the Canadian border has been buffeted by more than its share of domestic dilemmas. Family farms are folding, Pentagon scandals have tainted nearby defense contractors, the strong dollar is hurting manufacturers and deficit-plagued Amtrak may cancel the beloved local train to Montreal.

But it is not local woes that are brought to Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) when he visits the St. Albans Rotary Club.

"I don't know any Vermonters who want another war. What fundamentally can we do with the Russians to reduce tensions?"

"We all want peace. Who's going to make the first step—us or the Russians? Doesn't Reagan have to back off Star Wars?"

"Do you think we can really trust the Soviet Union? Can we afford not to?"

From the dairy farms to the town squares, here in the home state of the nuclear-freeze movement, almost everyone seems at least as concerned with what happens at the Geneva summit in November as with what happens in their own back yards. And although President Reagan won big here in 1980 and 1984, people appear unusually displeased with his stance toward the Soviets.

"Everyone knows the only issue is peace," said Ralph Deslauriers, president of Bolton Valley Ski Area near

Burlington, who was involved in Reagan's reelection effort. "We can survive gaffes in economic policy but not in nuclear policy. Someone has to step up to the plate [and negotiate]. I'm sick of posturing and tough talking. But I guess we'll know in a couple of months [at the summit] if it's worked."

"I think I'm much more realistic about dealing with the Russians than the current administration," said Roland Keenan, a Democrat and former sheriff and mayor of St. Albans. "This talk about standing tall—that's ridiculous. I think we have to have a strong defense, but I don't want this saber-rattling."

These attitudes may in part reflect the influence of Leahy, vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, who is a vocal advocate of arms control, combined with tough verification measures, and who spends one-third of the year stumping the state on that and other themes. But he says it goes deeper.

When weighing earlier this year whether to take the No. 2 post on the intelligence panel or to become ranking Democrat on the Agriculture Committee, Leahy recalled being told by a lifelong Vermont farmer:

"Pat, my wife and I and our children have talked about this. We love farming. We'll keep on farming. But there's not going to be any farming or anything else if we blow up the world. Go for the intelligence committee."

The sentiment appears to permeate the professions, even the most traditionally conservative. When Physicians for Social Responsibility recently held a meeting at the Brattleboro Memorial Hospital to speak about disarmament, almost every doctor on the staff turned up, according to Norman Rummion, respected editor of The Brattleboro Reformer.

"There's just an incredible perception in Vermont—it's very sincere and it's very, very deep—that nuclear war is the No. 1 issue and if you don't solve the problems of disarmament, the deficit is zilch," Rummion said.

—Dale
 Russakoff

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